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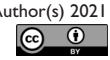

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Futures of sustainability: Perspectives on social imaginaries and social transformation. A comment on Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel's research program

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Abstract
This essay is a comment on the research program launched by Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel. My comment is specifically focused on their research agenda as outlined in their trend-setting article, 'Futures of sustainability as modernization, transformation, and control: A conceptual framework'. The comment is also addressed more generally to the research program of the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies 'Futures of Sustainability'. I raise three issues: the first relates to the very idea of the future; the second concerns the notion of social imaginaries and the third question is focused on the idea of social transformation.

Keywords
imaginaries, social theory, social transformation, sustainability, the future

Résumé
Cet article fait suite au programme de recherche lancé par Frank Adloff et Sighard Neckel. Il se concentre plus précisément sur leur projet de recherche tel qu'ils le présentent dans leur article programmatique « La modernisation, la transformation et le contrôle comme futurs durables : un cadre conceptuel ». Mon article interroge également plus généralement le programme de recherche « Les futurs du développement durable ». Je relève trois problèmes : le premier est lié à l'idée même de futur, le deuxième à la notion d'imaginaires sociaux et le troisième se concentre sur l'idée de transformation sociale.

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Mots-clés
durabilité, imaginaires, le futur, théorie sociale, transformation sociale

This essay is a comment on the research program launched by Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel. My comment is specifically focused on their research agenda as outlined in their trend-setting article, 'Futures of sustainability as modernization, transformation, and control: A conceptual framework' (Adloff and Neckel, 2019). My comment is also addressed more generally to the research program of the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies 'Futures of Sustainability', as it is presented in their article.[1]

Adloff and Neckel bring a much-needed macro-sociological perspective to look at current discussions on sustainability. Contemporary sociology and social theory have not had a lot to say on this important but controversial and contested topic. Macro-sociological analysis has been mostly directed at the past rather than the future. There is a well-developed tradition in historical sociology that has been deeply rooted in classical sociology for the analysis of major social transformations in modernity. The emphasis has been almost entirely on the historical emergence and transformation of modernity. In recent times there has been a revival of macro-sociological analysis of historical transformations around the theme of multiple or varieties of modernity. However, these debates are predominantly concerned with past historical trajectories, as for example the dominance of the West, global varieties of capitalism and democracy, and have had little to say on the future. Some of the main debates in critical theory recently are also about how the received view of the past should be corrected (see Delanty, 2020a). It is a striking feature of sociological analysis in general that the question of the future is not addressed. One assumption, which pervades modern social and political thought, is that the future will be much like the past. This assumption has of course been deeply ingrained in modernization theories. With the demise of the main historical challenge to capitalism and liberal democracy following the collapse of the USSR, the idea of a different future has mostly been buried.

These assumptions about the future can no longer be entertained. Nor can the question of the future be a matter of prognosis or prediction and assigned to futurology. The theme of sustainability and the wider context of the Anthropocene have changed our perception of the future (Delanty and Mota, 2017). In many ways the future is now; it is a product of the present and the choices made in the present. But, as the text by Adloff and Neckel very well shows, the future can also be imagined differently.

The question of the future and sustainability goes to the core of a very important sociological and philosophical problem, namely the question of the sustainability of human societies. There are normative issues in this which cannot be set aside and which concern, among other matters, the relation of the social world to the natural world. Until now, sociology has mostly relegated the natural world to the domain of environmental sociology. Its major questions mostly pertained to the relation between society and the state. As Adloff and Neckel reveal in their analysis of the concept of sustainability, the question of nature now lies at the core of sociology. It cannot be separated from the analysis of the social world. They are not the only scholars to do this; Bruno Latour has

made a substantial contribution, but their approach is particularly striking in its sociological pertinence (see also Latour, 2017).

Their timely and carefully crafted article for me raises three questions, to which in what follows I shall try to give some preliminary answers. I find myself in basic agreement with the general approach and argument. However there are a few issues that merit additional reflection. The first relates to the very idea of the future. The second concerns the notion of social imaginaries. The third question is focused on the idea of social transformation.

When is the future and of what does it consist of?

As I understand it, the central concern of the article is to reveal the main blueprints shaping the future. The future is not a single trajectory but entails multiple paths. Adloff and Neckel identify three such paths that are in competition with each other: modernization, transformation and control. These are the main visions of the future, at least in the sense of a notion of the future that is defined in terms of the idea of sustainability. The conceptualization of these visions is convincing, though it would be interesting to see how they relate to other sociological conceptions of the future (Urry, 2016). It is however clear that the idea of the future is not only a temporal condition that comes after the present but is inscribed in the present in that its developmental path is embedded in existing societal structures and in modes of consciousness, such as imaginary significations. The three visions shaping future trajectories are ideal types while being based on actual empirical trends. As ideal types, they are supposed to make sense of current debates and conceptions of sustainability, a term that by definition entails a relation to the future.

In my view, a broader conception of visions of the future would need to bring in other ways in which the future is envisioned today. I agree that the three types are particularly relevant as regards the idea of sustainability. Other scholars, including myself, have attempted to outline a wider typology of sustainable societies (Delanty, 2020b; Greenberg, 2014). Without insisting on an endless plurality of visions of the future, I think that there are five major ones, which can be briefly summed up.

In my approach to the future,[2] the first one must be the still relevant category of progress as a way to imagine the future. The idea of progress entails a vision of the future as a continuation of the present and without major rupture. This corresponds to what Adloff and Neckel call modernization: the future can be secured through innovation and improvement. The problem with the model of progress is that it always assumed that the improvement would cancel out the negativities and that because the present is better than the past, the future will also be better than the present (see Wagner, 2016). Clearly this conception of the future is compatible only with a limited politics of sustainability (see also Wagner, 2020).

A second vision of the future is the dystopian vision of catastrophe (see Horn, 2018). Rather than progress, a powerful current in contemporary consciousness is that of the end of the times and the arrival of a ‘dark Enlightenment’. Catastrophe thinking is a denial of the future, which is instead seen as determined by the past or by events out of human control. It is also a denial of the very possibility of creating a sustainable society. It may also include the denial of the causes of catastrophe, as in climate change denial,

conspiracy theories or new fringe epistemologies such as accelerationism, and those of the Alt-Right.

A third, vision of the future is a challenge to both the ideas of progress and catastrophe. I characterize this as techno-utopianism. In this case, the chances of a better future lie in technology. In my view, more consideration needs to be given to new technological visions of future utopias. These cannot be seen in terms of the idea of progress since they entail a major rupture with the present. Examples vary from climate engineering, new types of renewable energy, space travel, asteroid mining, lab-grown food, to self-replicating robots and developments in nanotechnology that will reduce reliance on existing scarce minerals.

My fourth category is close to what Adloff and Neckel call control, namely the future as resilience. In this instance, a sustainable future is a matter of preventing the worst; there is no belief in a better world. It concerns the capacity of societies and ecological systems to absorb shocks, whether as a result of heat waves, climate migration, pandemics, floods, water or food shortages. It is reflected in emergency governance and in the specter of ungovernability in the new politics of the Anthropocene.

Against these visions of the future is the fifth one, made of radical visions of societal transformation, such as those associated with radical political ecology and environmental justice. In contrast to the idea of resilience, which in essence accepts the objective context, seeking only to manage responses on the level of the subject, the transformative position demands the overcoming of the objectivity condition, as in for example calls for the end of farming, rewilding, etc. Such calls go beyond a passive response to a radical transformation in the relation of the social and natural worlds.

A feature of all of these visions of the future – I accept there are different ways of characterizing these visions – is that as visions they are interpretative frameworks. They are not predictive. Perhaps this aspect could have been given more prominence in the article (which does make clear it is not seeking predictive accounts of the future). The future as a temporal category is marked by uncertainty. We cannot know what will happen in the future. This is what opens the future up to interpretation. It can be imagined in different ways. The past – or an interpretation of the past – may offer a model for thinking about the future. But as often remarked, the past is a poor guide for the present, let alone for the future. A feature of the time consciousness of modernity is that the past does not offer the present with sufficient resources for thinking about the future. Reinhart Koselleck in a classic essay written in 1976, ‘Space of experience and horizon of expectation’ (Koselleck, 2004), showed that modern societies expanded the horizon of expectations beyond what has been previously experienced. The expectations that come with modernity demand that the future must be not only different from the past: it must be better and it must be realized in the present. Historically this gave rise to the idea of progress, but today this idea has become redundant even if not entirely rejected (see Wagner, 2016).

In this view, the future is one of expectation and cannot be easily satisfied by the received categories of the past. But the legacies of the past, along with the accumulation of learning, are what gives us the capacity for interpretation and expectation. Put differently, the future is always tied to the present in so far as possibility must emerge out of actuality. The future is that which is possible and what is possible must come from

actuality, that which exists. In my view, this is what makes possible a normative idea of the future. It is mediated by the potentiality of the present. For this reason, I would prefer to see a greater engagement with a normative conception of the future. I return to this below.

Delineating social imaginaries

The article and research program make much of the notion of collective imaginations and advances the idea of imaginations of sustainability. These are embodied in various practices and enable the formation of structures. The authors argue: 'The concept of imagination occupies a key position within this conceptual triad since it is to collective imaginations that we owe the futures of sustainability, i.e. our current images of possible futures to come' (Adloff and Neckel, 2019: 1016). My question is exactly what is the theoretical understanding of the imagination that underpins this conception? The authors cite Cornelius Castoriadis on the social imaginary, arguing that the world is not just cognitively and linguistically represented, but it is also mediated by imaginaries. Imaginaries are endowed by creativity, which is to say they have the capacity to create new things. Now comes a key claim: 'Imaginations tie together cognitive, evaluative and affective dimensions – knowledge, values, and emotions' (2019: 1017). Charles Taylor's notion of social imaginaries is also appealed to in making the claim that the imagination brings together different dimensions, such as the normative and the factual (Taylor, 2004). In my view, while this works well as a way of looking at sustainability as a broad cultural category, it is also in need of further clarification.

There are many ways imaginaries can be conceptualized, due to the diverse philosophical legacies of the concept. The concept figured in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, for instance (see Kaag, 2014). The concept, which has a strong Freudian legacy, was pivotal to Jacques Lacan's work and has also been used by Paul Ricœur. However, it is Castoriadis' use of the term that has the widest influence as a philosophical concept (Castoriadis, 1987). Johann Arnason (1989) has done much to clarify the relevance of Castoriadis for social theory. Perhaps because of its vagueness, Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* has been highly influential in sociological and historical applications (Taylor, 2004). Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' is undoubtedly one of the most well-known historically grounded applications of the concept of 'imagined' realities (Anderson, 1983). It is not entirely clear what specific meaning Adloff and Neckel attribute to the notion of the imagination and what the notion of a social imaginary indicates. This is one aspect of the approach adopted by Adloff and Neckel that I think is in need of further work, since these theorists and philosophers are not using the notion of the imaginary in the same way. This is reflected in the terminology: imaginations, imaginaries, social imaginary, etc. It is for this reason that more work by the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies 'Futures of Sustainability' on clarifying these questions would be welcomed.

Castoriadis, who appears to be the principal influence, developed a theory of the radical imaginary, which in my understanding is very different from the more general notion of a social imaginary. As the term suggests, it is a radical projection and used by Castoriadis to refer to something more than the social construction of reality, as in Émile Durkheim's

notion of social representations. Unlike Lacan, who contrasted the imaginary and the symbolic with the radical force of the real, Castoriadis asserts its radical nature. There is then a basic difference between Castoriadis and the somewhat domesticated notion of social imaginaries, as in Anderson and Taylor. The widespread use of the notion of an imaginary in social science today is often vague, as in an article on regimes of climate change (Levy and Spicer, 2013). This vague and catch-all use of the term seems to me to be at the cost of clarity if everything is an imaginary. This is not necessarily the case. Jens Beckert defines very clearly the idea of imaginary futures in capitalism, which requires notions of fictive futures to function (Beckert, 2016; Beckert and Bronk, 2018).

However, the main problem in my view is that while many collective realities can be described as imaginaries, it is not at all clear that these are radical imaginaries, as in Castoriadis' use of the term in the final pages of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987: 369–373). Castoriadis clearly has in mind a specific sense of the radical imaginary, which captures the striving or creation of something new: 'The radical imaginary emerges as otherness and as the perpetual orientation of otherness'. I find it difficult to relate this idea to the more general notion of social imaginaries, which generally refer to collective representations of social phenomena, not all of which have a radical dimension to them. In fact many are decidedly affirmative. So, taking Adloff and Neckel's three futures of sustainability, the modernization and control examples, by definition, do not entail radical imaginaries. I am also not convinced that sustainability as control entails an imaginary dimension even in the more domesticated sense of a social imaginary. Indeed, it possibly involves the suppression of the imagination. In my view, Castoriadis' notion of a racial social imaginary needs to be reserved for specific expressions of social imaginaries. For this reason, Taylor's more general concept is perhaps more useful for social scientific applications.

Yet, the notion of social imaginaries in general is in need of more scrutiny. It is not only a question of deciding which lineage of the term we should adhere to. I believe Suzi Adams, Paul Blokker, Natalie J. Doyle et al., following Arnason, make too strong a claim when they suggest the notion of social imaginaries is becoming an overall field of inquiry itself (Adams et al., 2015: 16). If this were the case, almost every major concept would be a field of inquiry. The literature on imaginaries never makes clear exactly what an imaginary (whether social or radical) is other than that it is not reducible to the imagination and that it is the source of the new. The fact that it is in widespread use does not in itself mean it is theoretically coherent. However, there is no doubt that the concept is important and captures a crucial dimension of culture. This I think is the key point. The imaginary is a dimension of culture. It can hardly be considered to be something independent, even if the imaginary is linked to the imagination, as both Castoriadis (following Lacan) and Peirce (following Immanuel Kant) claimed. Cultural phenomena entail imaginary elements in that many things, whether tangible or intangible, have to be imagined. This is especially the case with future oriented realities. The ability to think of the new requires an imaginary signification. But is it not the case that many social phenomena, such as policies of sustainability, do not entail imaginary significations? Many such policies are simply seeking the sustainability of that which exists and do not therefore require much imagination of alternative realities. In such cases imaginaries are simply social or cultural representations.

The research program makes much use of Adams et al. (2015) in a strong case for the relevance of social imaginaries. This article is excellent in setting out the relevance of social imaginaries. However, it is not without some flaws. Aside from the above-mentioned over-stating of social imaginaries as a field in itself, it outlines how they contribute to the completion of the hermeneutical turn in the social science. Letting aside the issue of completion, from a sociological perspective, I do not think that social science in general and sociology in particular is primarily characterized by hermeneutics, if what is meant is the more general interpretative tradition. This excludes too much other traditions of social inquiry. A social science concerned with futures of sustainability cannot confine itself only to the hermeneutic level, however important interpretation is and, as I have argued in the foregoing, it is paramount when it comes to thinking about the future. Then, what about the entire critical tradition of social science? Where does that figure in this analysis?

The problem here is the bifurcation of reason and the imagination. The imaginary makes the new possible, but it must be mediated by other concepts in order to emerge. I think it is claiming too much simply to say that the imaginary brings together the normative, cognitive, affective, etc. It may be the case that images give form to diverse elements, but images on their own are not enough to create new realities. Form is a concept of structure and thus requires more than an image to sustain it. It requires other elements, not all of which are imaginary. Jürgen Habermas has identified a core problem in Castoriadis' concept and which continues in the eclectic Castoriadis inspired literature. In short, and by no means entirely satisfactory as a critique of Castoriadis, he writes in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*: 'Castoriadis cannot provide us with a figure for the mediation between the individual and society' (Habermas, 1987: 334). The imaginary is one source of mediation but it is not the only one.

The solution to some of these problems with the status of the notion of the social imaginary in my view is to see it as an integral part of the cultural model of societies, rather than seeing it as an overall synthetizing force or as a separate entity.[3] The creation of something new is not only a matter of the power of the imagination, even if it is the source. It is also not only a matter of something that is not yet existent. The future is produced as a result of a possibility contained within the actual. In my view this relation between actuality, that which exists, and potentiality, needs to be given greater prominence. I am not convinced that the notion of the imaginary alone is able to capture all elements in the configuration.

What is social transformation?

My final remark is rather brief and concerns the concept of social transformation. In the article by Adloff and Neckel and central to their research program, the concept of transformation is related to one of the three futures of sustainability. This reasoning makes sense, even if one might see more than three futures of sustainability at work. While I have no disagreement with that, I think a broader notion of social transformation is needed. This can also be a way to made productive use of the notion of the radical social imaginary. The notion of social transformation concerns the making of future societies. It refers to how something new emerges.

From a sociological perspective such a perspective must entail an account of structural transformation. This would include the normative, cognitive, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of society. The future is created in moments of transformation when radically new interpretations of the present emerge. It makes sense to speak of social transformation only if there is a transformation of societal structures whereby long-term durable change takes place. This must include structures of consciousness, in the sense of more general cultural change, and signs of something new emerging. In this sense, then, social transformation signals something more than social change, for change always occurs, including regression. So, perhaps the analysis needs a sharper focus on social transformation than on social change. The perspective on the future cannot be confined to how societies change, since they are always in a process of change.

Finally, the notion of social transformation, in my view, entails an unavoidable normative position. This is also where I feel the theoretical rationale of the research program could be fruitfully developed, especially if it is indeed the case that it incorporates Castoriadis' notion of the radical imaginary. Moreover, the notion of sustainability as generally understood entails a normative claim, namely that the needs of the present should not be at the expense of future generations. The hope for a better life requires the critique of what Theodor Adorno called the 'damaged life' (Delanty, 2020b). In its present configuration, the approach merely seeks an analysis of the three trajectories and how imaginations of sustainable futures are related to practices and structures of sustainability.

The authors pose a key question for social theory, namely 'How do modern societies change with respect to their basic institutional order and their relationship with nature if they are guided by certain imaginations of sustainability?' To answer this important question will require more attention to social struggles and to transformation in consciousness than is allowed by the framework. To this end, there will be a need for greater engagement with social sustainability and environmental sustainability. For example, demands for social justice often intersect with environmental issue. The politics of environmental justice arise when peoples' lives are negatively affected by unsustainable economies. Demands for environmental justice accordingly seek more social forms of sustainability, which is therefore not only about preserving the environment but also about the sustainability of forms of life. Conservative green politics often separate these two domains of the political. I am not convinced that the notion of sustainability, important as it is, carries on its own sufficient critical and normative force to address these wider challenges of the Anthropocene. This is why, in my estimation, the politics of sustainability need to be inserted into the wider concept of the Anthropocene in order to bring more dimensions to the analysis.[4]

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1. It was my pleasure to have been a research fellow at the centre in November 2020.
2. See Chapter 12 of Delanty (2020a). For a more specific discussion of sustainability, see Delanty (2020b).
3. My thanks to Piet Strydom for helping to clarify this point.
4. I have addressed this in Delanty and Mota (2017). See also Dryzek and Pickering (2019).

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